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Returning to another place? Boundary crossing and career transitions among women in SET

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Context

- Science Engineering and Technology careers have been traditionally conceptualised as linear, with the ideal worker being male, mobile and available for continuous full time employment. This has significant implications for women who work in these sectors especially if and when they become parents (Ranson, 2005; Herman & Lewis, 2012).
- Many women in male dominated occupations have already encountered boundary crossing and transgression as they negotiate the conflicting identities of woman and SET professional, an 'in/visibility' paradox in which they are either assimilated as 'one of the boys', or defined by their otherness (Faulkner 2009).
- The onset of motherhood, the demands of caring responsibilities or other external triggers such as a partner's job move, often lead to women interrupting their careers or 'opting out' altogether (Stone 2007, Herman et al 2012).
- In the UK it has been estimated that two thirds of women qualified in SET subjects do not return after taking a career break (People, Science & Policy 2002).

Open University T160 course

- Return to Science Engineering and Technology
- Over 1000 participants between 2005 and 2011
- Partnership with UKRC (UK govt and EU funding)
- Online 10 week course
- Initial evaluation led to longitudinal database
- Destination survey in 2011 - 63 respondents
- Follow up interviews x 23

Outcomes – 5 years on

Outcome	No of respondents	%
Working	46	73
Full time work	16	25
Part time work	24	38
Self employed	6	10
Not working	17	27
Caring full time	7	11
Full time Study	3	5
Unemployed looking for work	4	6
Not in work/not looking for work	3	5
TOTAL	63	100

Summary of career transitions

Type of transition	Examples	Number	%
Career change	including retraining	20	32
Returning back to the labour market after a career break	Either full or part time. In same occupation as prior to their break	10	16
Progression in the same field	Promotion - Could include further training/qualifications	8	13
Movement out of the labour market	Full time caring or other reason	6	10
No change	Could be still unemployed, or still in same job	12	19
Not known	Data not available	7	11
Total		63	100.00

Individual

Employability skills and
attributes eg qualifications,
achievements, competencies,
work experience

Job seeking skills

Mobility and adaptability

Demographic – age, gender,
health and disability

Personal

Caring responsibilities

Family work culture

Access to resources

- transport,
- financial capital,
- social capital

External

Labour market

Recruitment practices

Vacancies

Enabling factors eg support
agencies/ intermediaries

Transition enablers/disablers

- Individual
 - Retraining/job seeking skills,
 - Lack of adaptability/mobility
- Personal
 - Family/gender roles (eg motherhood, partner going abroad, partner redundancy)
 - Networks/social capital (getting a foot in the door)
- External
 - Support from Intermediaries
 - Labour market and vacancies

Re-training/career change

I started 4 years ago as a trainee again, so I've had to do another degree but that's all been financed by the NHS, and it was a one-day a week day release which was all paid for, and it enabled me to get trained in a discipline and now I'm fully qualified, I'm registered and I can work in any hospital in the country so I went right back to basics. I wasn't necessarily planning to do that but to be quite honest there weren't that many options for me to get back into Science so I had to start from the beginning again.

Family gender roles: trade off

I suppose I had unconsciously made a decision that my husband's career always came first and my daughter and the rest of my family came first.[...]

And that may have been a mistake but I mean certainly, well I wouldn't say it was a mistake, I mean it's the way it is. I mean, you know, most people in, a lot of people should I say, who are successful women academics, either haven't married, don't have a family – and I'm talking about the life sciences here.

Intermediaries:T160

[the course] opened my eyes and it gave me the chance to start hunting, looking and seeing what my options were

[it provided] help about how to lay your CV out and fill in those gaps, and make it sound like you knew what you were talking about kind of thing. If you can have a strong, healthy CV you're half-way towards an interview... If you've not been in employment for so long you haven't got a clue, you don't know what the current way of thinking is or how to apply it for that particular job, how do you tweak it to that particular employer, things like that, and they covered all that on the course and it was brilliant.

Intermediaries: Confidence

Because I was coming at it from being isolated in a village with not many contacts because of various reasons and, you know, I think you can feel kind of hopeless about the situation and think well “Ah” you know, all these jobs and then you’ve got these gaps on your CV. And you also have this sort of feeling that everyone else is moving on while you’re standing still.

It’s easy to look at it negatively but I think once you’ve got a few skills and you talk to other people and I think [my tutor] was very good at that and saying “Well actually, you know, turn it round and don’t talk about what you haven’t got, talk about what you have got”

Strategies: Multiple life rafts

But I think fairly early on what became apparent to us was that because of the lack of confidence and because of the multiple barriers **there was a need to offer multiple life rafts, if you like.** .. you couldn't guarantee that one intervention was going to be the right one for an individual women returner. And also a lot of them engaged with us at a point when they were thinking about going back to work but not actually doing anything about it. So there was also a sort of a period of time that you needed to keep in touch with them and they might come along and engage in one intervention and become interested in the notion of returning and start to engage with it but not actually practically do anything about it until the year later when their children started school. So .. we worked out we needed a portfolio of different interventions that appealed to different people at different points in their journey back to work.

Returners Support Worker UKRC

Conclusion/ discussion

- Research into long term impact of interventions on career progression – 10 years?
- New pathways for ‘on-ramping’ that offer *multiple life rafts*
- Re-framing of academic science careers to enable flexible and alternative career paths